

“PEOPLE JUST HAVE A FUCKING GREAT TIME AND THAT’S WHAT WE’RE ALL ABOUT”

With the likes of Jake Bugg and Sleaford Mods putting Nottingham music on the map, meet the company behind the recent surge in popularity of local artists.

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George Akins is a busy man. He used to be able to take the start of the year off. Not anymore.

The reason? His company, DHP Family, has grown faster than anyone could imagine in the last few years. Even if you haven’t heard of DHP before, you will certainly know its four iconic music venues in Nottingham: Rock City, Rescue Rooms, Bodega and Stealth.

Although the speed of DHP’s growth may be surprising, this is no accident. It is clear that the firm and its boss are enormously ambitious. Originally just Rock City, DHP has developed in the last 20 years to include six venues (on top of the four in Nottingham, there is one apiece in Bristol and London), as well as an array of festivals, artist management wing and the promotion of live gigs and tours nationwide.

Despite this, George Akins still appreciates the importance of students in his venues. In terms of revenue for the company – £21m last year – “the freshers period and soon after are colossal”. 50% of the year’s takings can be earned in the autumn term alone.

Yet it hasn’t been easy. Akins took over the running of Rock City in 1995 from his father

at the tender age of 20. In the following years, he opened a number of small clubs and sports bars. None of these endeavours lasted, bringing him to realise that “what we are great at is music”. So he decided to change his strategy.

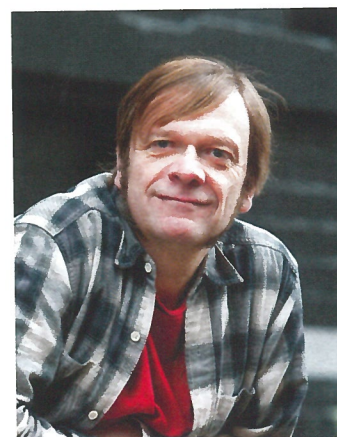
It is at this stage that he

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brought a former University of Nottingham (UoN) student on board. Anton Lockwood had come to UoN in 1984 to study Physics. As a student, he would write gig reviews in *Impact* and put posters up in halls in exchange for free entry to club nights and shows. After graduating, he ran indie club nights around Nottingham in addition to his day job as an IT manager.

By the time Lockwood was made redundant in 2002, he had already put on the likes of The White Stripes and The Strokes at The Social (now Bodega). Unsurprisingly, this attracted the attention of DHP. When the offer came in to help turn a “crappy little sports bar” into a proper music venue, he jumped at the chance. That sports bar became Rescue Rooms.

Lockwood is now DHP’s Promotions Director, head of



a team which books around 1500 shows a year around the UK. He gets to go to a lot of these himself. Surely booking that many, there must be some artists who he does not get on with? He is careful not to name any names, simply testifying that “sometimes the artists can be... not very nice”. He is sure to state that this is rare: “99 times out of 100 they’re fine”. Anyway, any negative experiences are outweighed by the pride and achievement he enjoys when a show does come together.

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One example of a proud moment came last year, when DHP promoted Ed Sheeran’s three nights at Wembley Stadium. “We brought Ed from playing in Stealth to about two people, and here he is playing to 240,000 people over three nights”. Sheeran has worked with DHP for the last six years, and played Dot to Dot festival way back in 2011.

The man who managed Sheeran’s sold-out Wembley run was Daniel Ealam. Like Anton Lockwood, he is a UoN alumnus. Studying English, he began working behind the bar at Rock City. He became music editor of *Impact* in 2002 and worked as a scout for Island Records. He did all this so that he could go to as many gigs as possible – “and they even paid me to do it!” He never thought he would forge a career in the music industry, but a few months before he graduated, DHP opened Stealth. This freed up an assistant management position at Rescue Rooms. A year later he was general manager of Rock City.

Now, Ealam divides his time between promoting concerts and heading the artist management wing of DHP. He started managing in 2011 after he “felt Nottingham was punching well above its weight in terms of the acts that we were getting to the city, but there weren’t really any acts breaking out of the city”. He manages local acts D.I.D. and Indiana, as well as London-based Rhodes. DHP have since had D.I.D. sign a deal

with Atlantic Records, whilst Indiana has had an album and single which have both peaked in the UK top 20. An *Impact* review of Rhodes’ gig at Rescue Rooms advises readers to “expect huge things”.

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In the meantime, Ealam is keen to add more Nottingham acts to the management roster. Although he is based in London, the core of DHP is still in its original home of Nottingham. He feels the DHP Family has “grown alongside Nottingham music”, and local artists are still “hugely important” to the company’s identity and ethos.

It hasn’t always been this way. George Akins admits that DHP used to be “woeful” in terms of promoting local

artists: “I was more interested in getting students drunk in my clubs”. Up until about 10 years ago, “our input back into the Nottingham music scene was pretty minimal”. Now, they actively promote home-grown artists at their venues and festivals, such as Dot to Dot and Splendour.

It is no coincidence that Nottingham’s musical profile has grown in recent years alongside DHP’s efforts to put more back into the community. For all of Akins’ obvious (and justified) pride in the rest of the business, he speaks most passionately about his company’s role in bringing through new local acts. He is clearly excited about the future. “Now Nottingham’s on the map,” he enthuses, “we’re going to create some great musicians out of our city that never had a conveyor belt for it before”.